

Public Speaking and Body Language

For many of you this will be your first experience of public speaking in English, and you may view it as a somewhat intimidating experience. However, we have chosen to prepare you for this particular type of task as we consider it an essential skill for your future careers, both in the academic community and the world of work. Furthermore, we believe that once you have completed this course, you will understand what is required to give a polished, professional talk and be better equipped to face such an undertaking.

There are several components in a presentation: the topic itself, the information you would like to give about it, your slides and also your delivery. For a presentation to be successful and memorable for your audience however, all these components need to be strong. One aspect that you should not underestimate is delivery. In other words the way that you physically convey your message in front of your audience.

Good delivery relies on certain features that only you possess and no matter how interesting the topic or the slides are, if you are not convincing in your delivery the audience will notice immediately. Although your voice is one of the most important aspects, your body language should not be underestimated. The list below describes the features that you need to consider when speaking in public.

1. Voice quality

We inherit our voice and cannot change it but we can learn to use it effectively. You need to learn to project without shouting so that everyone can hear you. You also need to inject energy into your speaking, as a flat, lifeless voice does not hold people's attention. Lastly, you need to be expressive in order to be interesting. Pitch and intonation are essential features of speech. Practise your speech, and concentrate on giving emphasis to the key words you want the audience to focus on. Remember to use a falling tone at the end of sentences. A final rising tone will not give your speech authority and does not reflect a natural speech pattern in English.

2. Pace

Pace means the speed at which you speak, and this should vary to suit the content of your talk. Points that need to be particularly memorable should be said more slowly, accompanied by an appropriate use of pauses. However, if your entire presentation is slow and emphatic, you risk sounding boring and unnatural. Too many hesitations will give the impression of uncertainty, and can be difficult to listen to. If you notice that you *umm* and *ahh* too much, try closing your mouth between sentences while you gather your thoughts. Avoid using fillers such as *you know*, *like* and *sort of* as they do not belong in an articulate, polished talk. Lastly, do not underestimate the importance of silence. Silence is a very effective means for carrying the weight of a strong statement, making the audience aware of the importance they should attach to what you have just said or are about to say.

3. Practice and spontaneity

Although you should practice your presentation several times, try to retain some spontaneity in your speech. Your intonation patterns are more likely to remain natural and you will find it easier to be expressive than if you memorise the whole talk. Your voice will carry a sense of energy which you will convey to the audience, holding their attention. Rely on your notes and your slides to avoid forgetting key points, and do not worry if the information comes out slightly differently each time you practise your talk. The occasional mistake will not necessarily detract from an excellent presentation.

4. Stance

This term refers to how you stand in front of an audience. You should aim to look confident, and the best way to do so is to stand with your weight evenly distributed on both feet. This position will also prevent you from swaying about and consequently distracting the audience. A confident stance is obvious to the audience and makes you appear more authoritative and trustworthy as a speaker.

5. Eye contact

Eye contact is essential in order to engage with your listeners. Like stance, it makes you seem more confident and inspires a sense of trust. It also helps you to gauge whether the audience is following you, or whether you need to reformulate something you have just said to make it clearer. Ensure that you make eye contact with as many members of your audience as possible, involving also those people who are not sitting directly in front of you or are at the back of the room. Avoid turning away and speaking to the screen and consulting your notes for long stretches of time as those listening to you will inevitably lose interest.

6. Facial expressions

Another way to engage your audience and help communicate sincerity and credibility is by means of facial expressions. A frozen face will not communicate your enthusiasm for your subject, and will do little to win the audience over. Although you are unlikely to want to smile throughout the whole presentation as your facial expressions should match your content, you should smile at them when you greet them at the beginning. This helps to create a relaxed atmosphere and again inspires confidence.

7. Gestures

This is the way in which you use your hands to help communicate your message, and when used appropriately, can contribute a great deal to your performance. The degree to which people naturally use their hands when speaking varies from person to person, so consider whether your natural gestures will be seen as appropriate or exaggerated when giving a talk. Your movements should not be so melodramatic as to detract from what you are actually saying. However, you should also avoid putting your hands in your pockets which will make you seem unprofessional or standing with your arms folded in front of your chest which is a defensive posture. Practise your presentation in front of a mirror and think about what gestures would help emphasise a point or express an emotion.

Finally, remember that your audience wants to find out what you have to say. They have come to listen to you and ideally should go home with a message. Most audiences tend to empathise with the speaker, putting themselves in his/her shoes since the daunting nature of public speaking is a common sentiment. Convincing yourself that they are not hostile enemies but just ordinary people who are curious to learn, will make you more relaxed and able to perform better.